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ABSTRACT

A 12-item survey of English background and proficiency was administered to all Washington State University freshman English students on the first day of class during the fall semester of 1977. A sample of 700 completed questionnaires was selected for analysis. In general, student responses indicated an overall weakness in the teaching of writing and grammar at the high school level. Nearly half the sample either had never had or had taken only one high school writing course. Roughly 22% of the students stated they had written fewer than five papers during high school, while 50% indicated they had written fewer than ten papers. Approximately 46% of the students rated themselves above average in reading ability, but only 29% rated themselves above average in grammar. Fully 80% of the sample stated that their areas of greatest weakness were grammar and the structure of writing. Only 40% of the students completed the questionnaire without making spelling errors: 40% misspelled one or two words, while 5% committed more than three errors. Over 64% of the students listed three books or fewer that they had read and enjoyed prior to university enrollment. When variables in the study were correlated with final grades for the two freshman writing courses, the best predictor of grades was the students' self ratings of high school writing performance. (RL)

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HIGH SCHOOL WRITING PROGRAMS AND THEIR EFFECT ON COLLEGE COMPOSITION

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High School Writing Programs and Their Effect On
College Composition

Students who enter our universities continue to suffer from an inadequate preparation in the writing of their mother tongue. The shock of their composition instructors has now abated to an intermittent twinge or wince as they learn to minister to a chronic malady.

This study evolved from concern over the extent of the background deficiencies of our students and curiosity over how much such deficiencies influence their final grades in our basic composition courses. We who are involved with teaching composition at Washington State University decided that the students themeelves were a valuable source of information. We would simply ask them about their high school experiences with composition.

Design of Study

The questionnaire used in the study was a twelve item survey concerned with the English background and proficiency of Washington State University freshmen. Prior to fall semester, 1977, a list of questions was tentatively drawn up. Other items were then suggested by the instructors of English 101 and 201 (basic writing courses at W.S.U.). These additions were mainly concerned with the influence of reading habits on writing ability. A final decision was to count all spelling errors on the two-page questionnaire and correlate the resulting data with the final college composition grade. Items appearing on the questionnaire were:

Name and location of high school.
Self-ratings of performance in high school composition courses.
Number of compositions written in high school.
Self-rating of mechanical/grammatical ability.
A prediction of final grade in English 101 or 201.

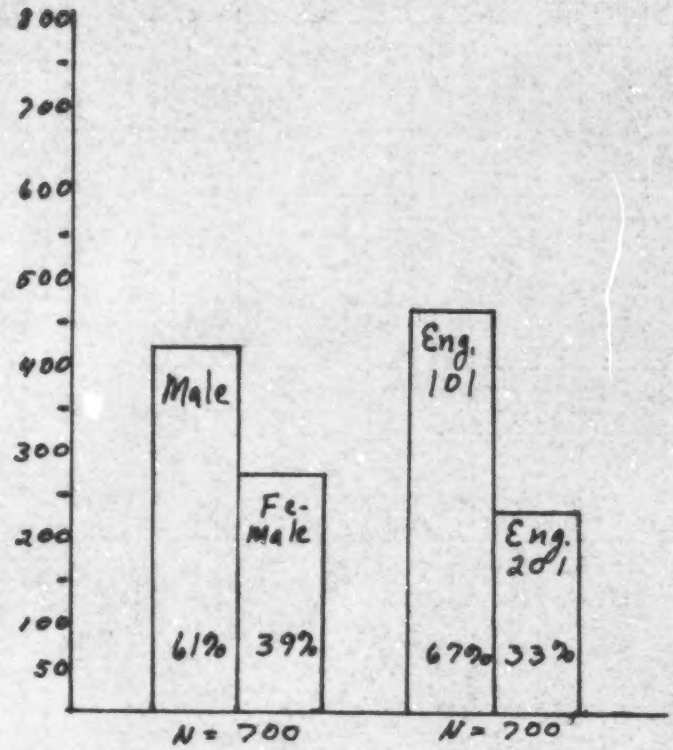

Figure 1 Population Breakdown By Sex & Course Number

A "yes"/"no" statement as to whether the student would take English 101 or 201 if it were not required
The desired area of writing to be covered in 101/201
An indication of the student's greatest weakness in writing
A list of books the student had read and enjoyed in the past
A list of favorite magazines
Self-rating of reading skills

All questions involving ratings and prediction of grades were answered on the following five-point scale:

(1) very low
(2) moderately low
(3) average
(4) moderately high
(5) very high

The questionnaire was administered to all English 101/201 composition students present during first day of class, fall semester, 1977.

Population Sample

A total of 1410 completed questionnaires were returned to the researcher by English 101/201 composition instructors. A population sample of 700, roughly one half of the total number or returns, was decided upon. It was necessary to draw upon 834 questionnaires to achieve a sample of 700. There were a substantial number of drops for which there were no final grades, and some of the questionnaires were missing names and student numbers, The latter were replaced with subjects having complete data.

As is indicated by figure 1, 425 students were male and 275 were female; 470 were enrolled in English 101 and 230 were registered in English 201.

figure 1
Insert figure 1

There were 331 high schools represented in the study: 230 were in-state, 79 were out of state, and 22 were in foreign countries.

Table I Number of High School Writing Courses and Compositions

Variable	Students Responding	%	Cumulative %
No. of H.S. Comp. Courses			
5	8	.011	1.000
4	29	.041	.987
3	132	.187	.947
2	200	.286	.759
1	208	.297	.473
0	123	.176	.176
No. of Comps Written in H.S.			
16 & over	219	.313	1.000
10 - 15	132	.189	.687
5 - 9	195	.279	.498
2 - 4	117	.167	.219
0 - 1	36	.052	.052

Results

In general, student responses pointed to an over-all weakness in the teaching of writing and grammar on the high school level. Table I shows that nearly 50% of the sample had 0-1 composition courses during their secondary school education. Of that number, 18% replied that they had never had a writing course in high school.

Insert Table I

Responses concerning the number of compositions written during secondary school were no more encouraging. Roughly 22% stated that they had written fewer than five papers during those years, while 50% had written less than ten. The latter figure would translate into an average of three compositions a year during a three-year high school program. Compare these figures with suggestions of noted authorities in the field. Donald M. Murray believes that the writing of one composition per week is an absolute minimum (Murray, 1968). The college English Examination Board conservatively proposes that one-third of classroom time be spent on writing. James Bryant Conant, in his survey of high school education, recommends that one-half of training in English be concentrated in composition (Conant, 1959). Some time has passed since those suggestions were made, but not much has changed. In actuality, only 15.7% of class time, as reported by 168 high schools in 45 states, is spent on composition (National Study No. 1994).

Self-Ratings

The self-rating profiles for grammatical and reading ability are shown in figure 2. This diagram shows students to be more confident of their reading skills than of their knowledge of grammar. These results are not surprising, since high school English programs devote much more time to the teaching of

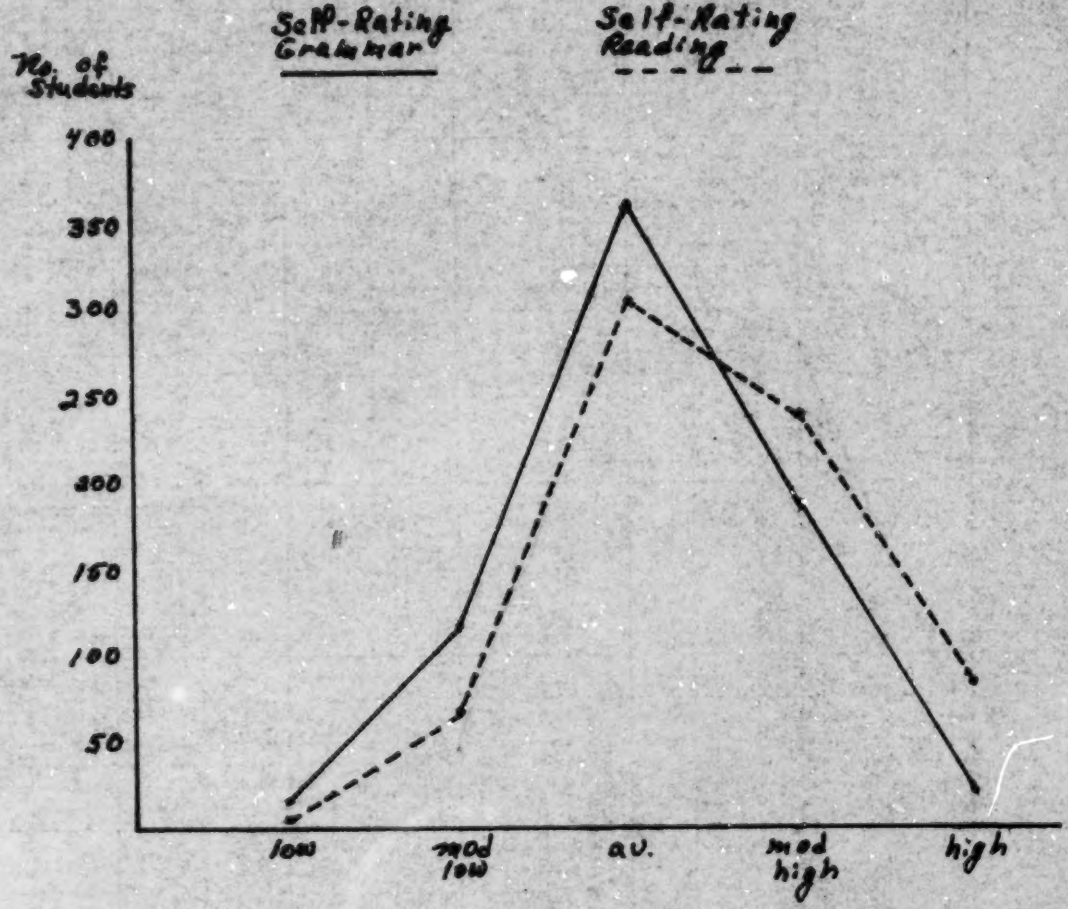

Figure 2 Self Ratings of Grammatical & Reading Ability

Variable	Students Responding	%
Desired Areas to be Covered		
Orig. - Creat.	12	.017
Style	167	.096
Content-Form	180	.257
Grammar-Mech.	109	.156
Over all work	332	.474
Greatest Weakness in Comp.		
Orig.-Creat.	26	.037
Style	45	.064
Content-Form	272	.387
Grammar-Mech.	288	.411
Personal Background	69	.097

Table II Problem Areas in Writing Indicated by Students

literature than they do to the instruction of grammar and writing. Approximately

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Insert figure 2

46% of the students rated themselves as above average in reading ability, while only 29% rated themselves as above average in grammar.

Writing Weaknesses

Two items of the questionnaire were used to pin-point areas within writing that might be particularly worrisome to the students. One of thequestions (see Table II) asked students what they would like their college composition course to cover and the other asked them to indicate their area of greatest weakness in writing. Again, students indicated that they lacked confidence in their over all writing skills. Nearly 48% stated that they needed work in all areas of writing. Another 42% zeroed in on the mechanical aspects of writing (grammar & form), Few indicated that they needed further work in creative writing and

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Insert Table II

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style.

Fully 80% of the sample stated that their areas of greatest weakness were grammar and structure of writing. The item marked "Personal Background" included such personal weaknesses as lack of motivation, a dislike for writing, and poor previous instruction.

Spelling

To add to the problem areas of grammar and structure, students still can't spell very well. Only 40% of the students in the study were able to avoid

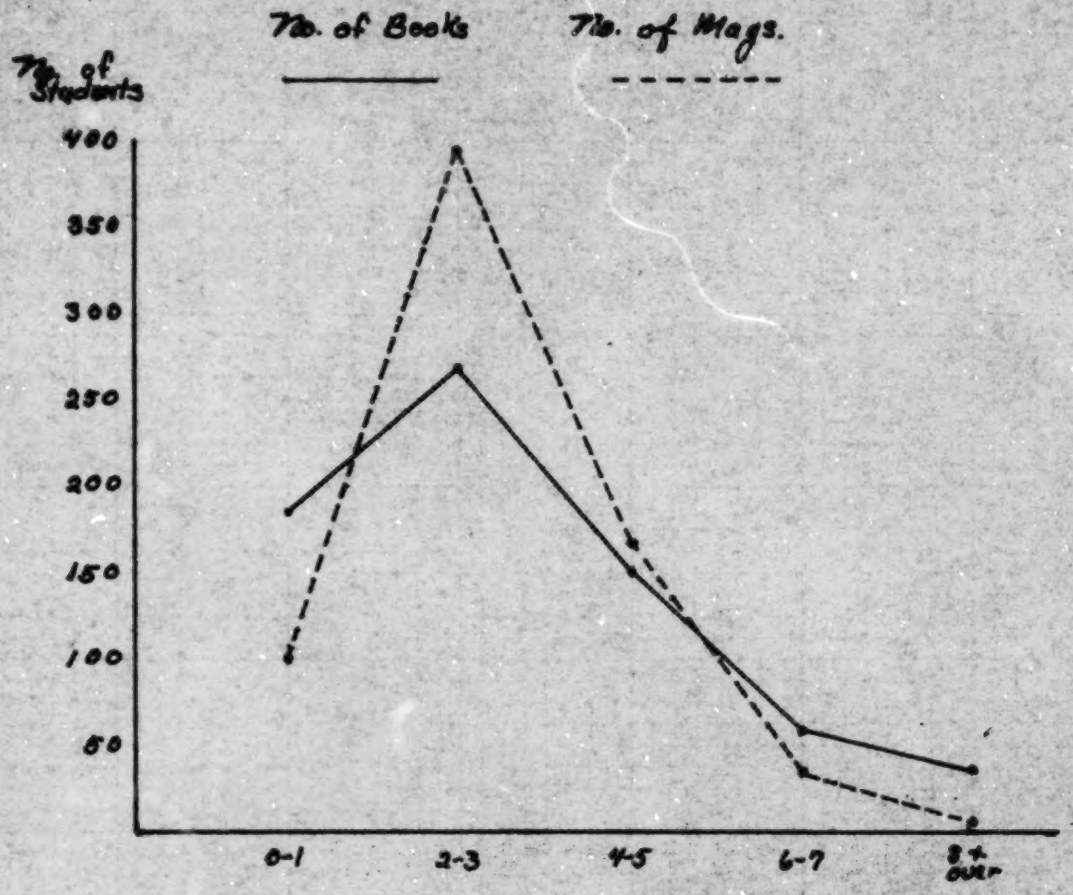

Figure 3 Number Of Books and Magazines Read and Enjoyed Prior To College

spelling errors while completing their questionnaires. Of the remaining number, 40% misspelled 1-2 words, 14% made three errors, and 5% committed more than three spelling errors. On the scale that was used, a five indicated no mistakes, a four showed one to two mistakes, a three reflected three spelling errors, a two translated into four to five mistakes and a one was over five misspelled words. But for two factors, it is likely that more spelling errors could have been tabulated. Through years of experience, students have become adept at hiding spelling errors with poor handwriting and/or the use of abbreviations.

Reading Habits

The reading habits of college-bound students are not very impressive. In fact, (see figure 3) they are rather appalling. The T.V. generation continues to have little affinity toward the written word. Only 5% of the sample could be considered readers. Fully 64% of the students listed three or less books that they had read and enjoyed prior to university enrollment. Magazines fared

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Insert figure 3

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even worse, and many that were listed were not high in literary value (i.e. Playboy - Mademoiselle etc.)

In spite of all their insecurities and problems with writing, a large number of students consciously avoids writing courses. When put to the question, 36% said that they would not take English 101 or 201 unless required to do so. Of the remaining number, 8% were undecided and 56% indicated that they would take it or a similar course in writing. This sample breakdown, later referred to as "inclination", was correlated, as was sex, with final grades in English 101 or 201 (see tables III and IV).

Table III Variable Means and Correlations with Final 101/201 Grades

Variable	Mean	r
No. of H.S. Comp. Courses	1.67	.048
Final 101/201 Grade	3.62	1.000
No. of H.S. Comps. Written	3.54	.128
Pred. of Final 101/201 Grade	3.46	.198
Inclination to take 101/201	1.31	-.037
No. of Books Read	3.00	.098
No. of Mags. Read	2.90	-.004
Self-rating of H.S. Writ. Abil.	3.41	.279
Self-rating of Gram. Abil.	3.12	.223
Self-rating of Reading Abil.	3.47	.131
No. of Misspelled words on Questionnaire	4.14	.196

Correlations

Variables in the study were correlated with final grades in the two basic courses of college composition. Results are shown in table III. The best predictor of grades was the students' self-ratings of high school writing performance, which correlated at a .279. Other positive indicators were self-ratings of grammatical ability (.223), the students' prediction of their final 101/201 grade (the five point scale introduced earlier was translated into letter grades A through F) at .198 and the number of words misspelled on the questionnaires (.196). Poorest predictors were their "yes"/"no" answers to the question of whether they would take English 101 or 201 were it not required (-.037) and the number of magazines students listed as part of their reading repertoire. The number of composition courses taken in high school and the number of compositions written during that time showed to be poorer predictors than had been anticipated, although the latter was a better indicator than the former.

Insert Table III

Several of the means indicated in Table III reflect a five-point scale: final grades, number of compositions written, self-ratings and prediction of final grades.

Table IV means and correlations reflect differences of sex and voluntary (yes) - involuntary (no) status of 101 and 201 composition students. All means were higher for females than for males. Correlations for females were higher in all but two of the variables - misspelled words and reading ability. The means of the voluntary - involuntary students were very similar to each other. Generally, however, the correlations were higher for the

Table IV Sex and inclination breakdowns of variable means and correlations

Variable	Male Mean	Female Mean	Male r	Female r	Yes Mean	No Mean	Yes r	No r
No. of H.S. Comp. Courses	1.60	1.76	.017	.071	1.69	1.62	.064	.018
No. of H.S. Comps. Written	3.45	3.69	.101	.142	3.55	3.53	.117	.146
Self-rating of H.S. Writing Abil.	3.35	3.51	.262	.281	3.41	3.42	.308	.266
Self-rating of Gram. Ability	3.08	3.19	.200	.243	3.10	3.16	.249	.178
Self-rating of Reading Ability	3.41	3.57	.156	.065	3.45	3.51	.131	.134
No. of Misspelled Words on Questionnaire	4.03	4.32	.200	.134	4.11	4.20	.232	.130

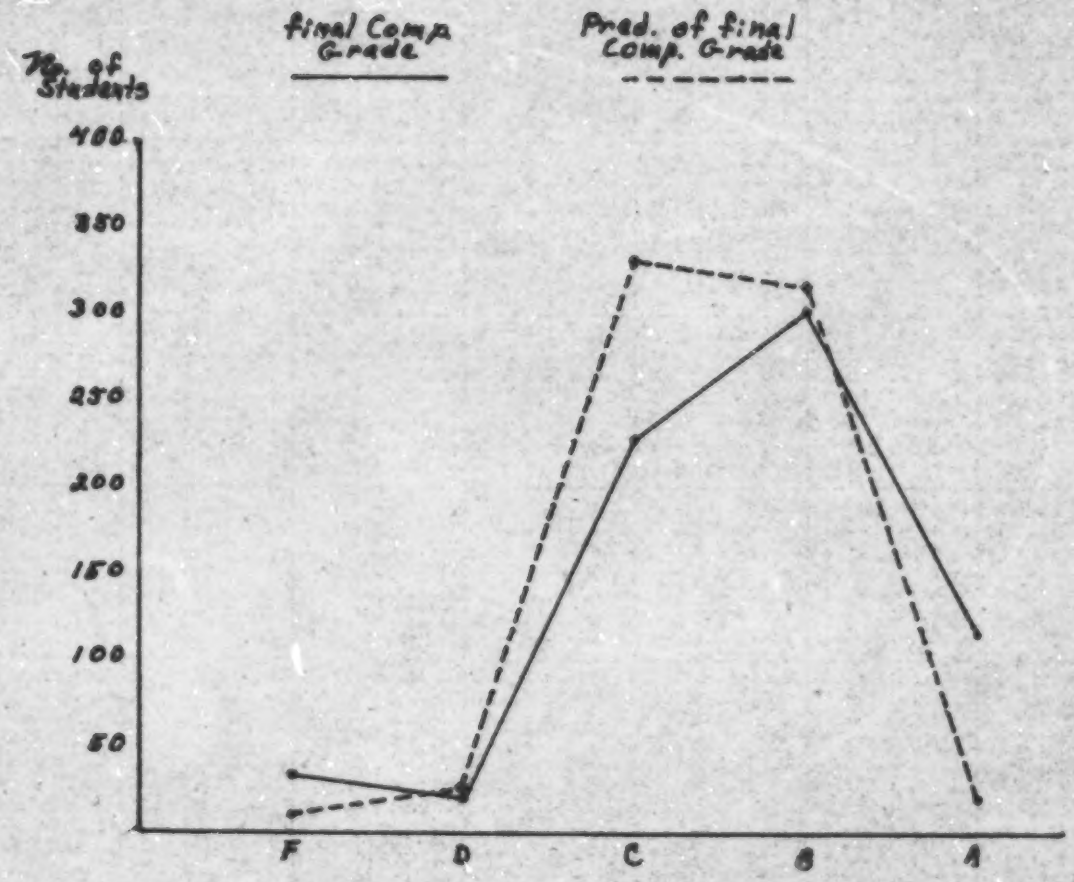

Figure 4 Final 101 201 Grade Distribution and Prediction of These Grades By Students

voluntary students. The highest correlations, again, were with high school

Insert Table IV

writing ability. The "yes" r was .308 and the "no" r registered at .266.

Final Grade Distribution

Figure 4 shows the final grade profile for English 101 and 201. As can be seen, the grade curve was skeded toward higher grades. Fully 60% got A's and B's, 33% got C's and only 7% got D's and F's. Also shown in figure 4,

Insert figure 4

and also skewed toward higher marks, are the students' predictions of these grades. However, more students received A's and B's than they had prognosticated. Of the 700, 48% predicted they'd get A's and B's, 47% predicted C's, and only 5% forecasted lower than average grades.

Conclusions and Speculations

High school students simply aren't writing enough. The reasons for this are varied. First of all, secondary school writing programs are not offering enough basic writing courses and requiring their students to take them. Many electives are being offered at the high school level that qualify for credit in English - courses like science fiction literature, creative poetry writing and the like. It is possible, as is shown in the results of this study, to complete high school with never having written a paper. As a result, many students are entering college with the conviction that they simply are not

prepared to face a course in college composition.

This inadequate preparation is not solely the fault of the secondary school curriculum. Students themselves are to blame for consciously avoiding classes in composition, even though they know that they desperately need to improve their ability to write. This study showed a large number of reluctant students at the college level. The resistance or hostility of the subjects, once they were enrolled in a writing course, did not play a significant factor in the results of the study, however. Means for the voluntary students were nearly the same as those of the involuntary ones. It appears that the latter made the best of their predicament and worked as hard as those who were in class because they wanted to be there.

Writing courses are viewed by both teacher and student as frightening or forbidding areas of sheer drudgery. It is true that writing is hard work. Results are slow in coming and require much toil and perseverance to effect improvement. Many are not willing to invest the work or the time. High school teachers, already beset with a heavy work load, are hard put to find the time to correct many papers.

Universities must share the blame as well. We produce teachers who are overtrained in the area of literature and woefully under-trained to teach grammar and writing. Our student teachers must pick up on their own what they can in these areas. In other words, our beginning teachers are highly unqualified professionals in certain basic areas of English. If the current trend back to the basics remains with us for a while, however, it is likely that the background deficiencies of both student and teacher will diminish.

Even with all the stress placed upon literature in high school, we are turning out few students who enjoy reading. Perhaps, as has been suggested by Marshall McLuhan, the printed word is becoming largely obsolete to a

visually oriented generation. Even though more is being printed today than ever before, the new electric technology, with television spear-heading the attack, is undersutting and might possibly destroy written language as we know it.

Predictors of College Composition Grades

Students' grades in college composition seemed to depend more on the number of high school compositions they had written rather than on the number of writing courses they had had. Many students stated that they had taken composition classes but had written little in them, and other students said that they had never had a composition course per se, but had written quite a few papers in literature classes. Thus, the number of composition courses taken and the number of papers written seemed to be separate and distinct variables, one having little relationship with the other.

The best predictors of performance in college composition were the students' ratings of their own writing and grammatical ability. All of the correlations in the study, however, were affected by grade inflation. Final grades in English 101 and 201 at the university level registered few D's and F's, while a large percentage of students received A's and B's. It is possible that the correlations would have been higher under the influence of a more normal distribution.

It is likely that another variable, along with grade inflation, had an important influence on the correlations. That variable is individual motivation and perseverance. A student's will to succeed despite a weak background, however, is a most difficult if not impossible variable to measure.

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